

The Mexico that I Know

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Yo conosco (I know), *yo recuerdo* (I remember) crowded streets, conflicting sounds, and layer upon layer of history. This is my home of Mexico City, where I grew up, lived and loved life in the embrace of a Mexican family of seven people. Most Americans think of the crime, pollution, and poverty when they think of my city. It is this, but behind the shanty towns and the violence is a city thriving with history, passion and culture. Let me tell you about my Mexico....

Many people have written about Mexico as a place of contrasts. I come from an upper-class family where my life was very different from the great numbers of people in my city. In Mexico, the divide between the life of the rich and the poor is palpable. My family owned a poultry business, which my grandfather started as a young boy. Over time, his business grew to be one of the largest chicken businesses in the city. You might imagine the need for chickens in a city of 22 million taco and enchilada eating people! I grew-up on tree lined streets, going to private school where I learned English at an early age.

Family, food and friends are my Mexico. My grandparents owned a large country house just outside of Mexico City near Teotihuacán (the famous pyramids). In fact, when they were excavating to build the home, they found artifacts left from the Teotihuacán's, the ancient people that lived there over a thousand years ago.

Country houses are common second homes for residents of Mexico City and provide a place to escape the hustle and bustle of the city. The country house was a place of wonderful memories for me. It is a large, Spanish-style hacienda with a pool, jai-alai

court (a popular game that originated in the Basque country). Every weekend when I was young, my family would pile into our car to spend the weekend at the country house. We were joined there by my aunts, uncles, their children and my grandparents. My mom would cook for days to prepare food to bring along with us, even though there were cooks there who helped, as well.

The wonderful thing about life at the country house was that time passed so effortlessly. I played with my cousins in the big pool until it was dark and my parents told us to come in to eat. The parties at the country house, like many Mexican parties, lasted all night. It wasn't uncommon for my uncles to play poker until 5:00am, have breakfast and then sleep until noon. But the adults weren't the only ones who stayed up late! All the children stayed up playing games too. When we did sleep, my immediate family gathered together in one of the large rooms that were set aside for each of my grandfather's sons. My three brothers, sister and I slept in the large bed with my parents and fell fast asleep after talking, laughing and telling stories.

Holidays are another special memory, especially Christmas. We are a Catholic family and Catholicism holds great significance in Mexico. Being Catholic and being Mexican can't really be separated and religion is a deep part of my culture. Holidays are a combination of a spiritual time filled with special rituals, as well as a time to celebrate, give gifts, and of course, eat wonderful food. We celebrate Christmas for over a month. It starts with *pre-posadas*, parties that happen throughout the month of December, and ends on Three Kings Day (twelfth night) in January, when the wise men were said to have come to visit the baby Jesus.

Pre-posadas are wonderful examples of my culture. These parties are times when friends and family visit each other. Houses are opened up and even strangers are welcomed in for food and socializing. *Pre-posadas* are a time to remember when Mary and Joseph couldn't find a place to stay. My culture counters this story by celebrating community by welcoming anybody in for food and shelter. Just like at the country house, family and friends gather into one place for a big party.

This is just a small taste of the Mexico I know. The experiences from my childhood are like the circle of the *rosca de reyes*, a bread that is served during the Three King's Day celebration. Mexico is a place linked together through family, religion, food and culture.